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## Pence fears House straying from its conservative ideals

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Binder



Doane

WASHINGTON – A decade ago, conservatives in the House stomped their feet and threatened chaos within Republican ranks – sometimes taking the threat into action – when they thought the GOP leadership was listing left.

But with the expansion of the GOP majority and an increase in conservative Republicans among the 232 House members, they've traded in their confrontational tactics for a chance to whisper in the ear of the House speaker and his top lieutenant.

They've also shifted gears in leadership, moving from a barnburner-style chairman a few years ago to a Hoosier with an aw-shucks manner, TV savvy and a ready quip or tear-jerker story to illustrate his point.

Rep. Mike Pence, R-6th, has taken the helm of the Republican Study Committee, the 100-plus group of Republicans within the Republican majority that wants to reverse President Bush's education policies, reduce taxes, push for more curbs on abortion, ban gays from marrying, repeal part of the campaign finance laws, reduce federal spending and aim for a balanced budget, restrict the judges from ruling on certain issues and tie Medicare's prescription drug coverage to a recipient's income.

Pence "has a way of crystallizing things with such normal talk, that I really think he's going to be able to sell the conservative ideas so conservatives don't look like crazy radicals," said Danielle Doane, the liaison to the House from the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. "He says something, and you just find yourself nodding, saying, 'I never thought of it that way. You're absolutely right.' "

Pence sees the next two years as crucial for his party, which he thinks sometimes strayed from bedrock principles during Bush's first term.

"Many Republicans, even many who call themselves conservatives, have begun to see government as the solution to every social ill," he said. "I believe this is a historic departure of the limited-government tradition of our party."

He said that has to change.

"We've got to go back to what conservatives know to be true. We've got to go back to fixed principles. Otherwise, I really do believe they risk electoral disaster," he said, quoting Harry Truman as saying that if you give voters a choice between a Democrat and a Democrat, "they'll choose the Democrat every time. Ultimately, our party will not do well by becoming some version of the Democrat majority that controlled the House for many decades before us. There's a sense that on fiscal policy and issues of limited government that we're looking more and more like what we railed against and what we replaced."

Programs that Bush twisted congressional arms to pass – the education bill that creates mandatory testing and the Medicare expansion – should be re-examined, he said.

He said Bush is "a conservative in his heart. I am cautiously optimistic that that heartbeat is going to get to his feet a little more often."

But Pence also hinted that Bush's ability to get conservatives to hold their noses and vote for legislation they dislike will be limited in his lame-duck term.

"There was an awful lot of latitude given to this president in the first term in the wake of the tragic events of Sept. 11. An awful lot of people were willing to give the president a lot of slack on the home front," he said.

But now, Pence said, it's time for the White House to stand tougher.

"The times that this administration has succeeded is when they began on the right and then moved to the middle. The times we have seen conservatives routed on Capitol Hill is when we start in middle and then try to come to the right but ultimately go left," he said. "The day that the White House announced that they wanted a bipartisan education bill, educational choice in that bill was dead. Every conservative reform for education that the president had campaigned on was dead."

As chairman of the Republican Study Committee, Pence will be the public face of House conservatives. Since coming to Washington in 2001, Pence parlayed his years as the host of a conservative radio talk show into regular appearances on TV news and confrontation shows such as CNN's "Crossfire." He said one of the reasons he was recruited to head the conservative group was his media savvy.

He said the board of the group told him that "House conservatives need to be more effective in getting their message out."

The Republican Study Committee's members chip in \$5,000 a year (\$2,500 for freshmen) for the group's roughly \$600,000 yearly budget. The organization is in its third configuration since being founded in 1974 with a handful members.

When Newt Gingrich was elected speaker, he eliminated the funding for the group. It was reborn in 1997 as the Conservative Action Team.

It was renamed the Republican Study Committee in 2001 and has doubled in membership since then. Of the seven Hoosier Republicans, only Rep. Steve Buyer, R-4th, is not listed as a member on the group's Web page (the full roster is a secret). Newly elected Rep. Mike Sodrel, R-9th, plans to join.

But if Republicans are in the majority, and conservatives in the ascendancy, what niche does the Republican Study Committee fill?

"Coalitions within the majority party are essential for organizing and keeping pressure on the party leadership," said Sarah Binder, a congressional expert with the Brookings Institution, a moderate think tank.

"Parties in Congress are rarely monolithic in their views," she said. "Organization of cohesive legislators is essential for pursuing policy and institutional change."

The Heritage Foundation's Doane said the group also is a sounding board for conservative ideas, not just for House members but for outside groups.

And she said a group that isn't looking to compromise or find bipartisan solutions can be a mirror for Republicans to look into.

"A lot of times in Congress, you lose your way," she said. "It's nothing to do with people's integrity. ... It works as a filter

to tell you what is the conservative issue on a position and what is not.”

Pence said the Republican Study Committee should be the counterweight to the 20 or 30 House Republicans who are moderates.

“They have an enormous impact on a 15-seat majority,” he said of moderate Republicans. “Our job is to create the equilibrium that the majority of the majority ought to create.”

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